

Tough Topics Series

Learning and Teaching Support

Issue 1

Supporting Military Kids During Deployment

When military parents are mobilized, their kids are in need of and deserve special support from local schools and communities. During the emotional cycle of deployment, their lives are literally turned upside down! A significant portion of stability in their family system has temporarily been disrupted resulting in increased levels of stress and potential separation anxiety.

As a result, these military kids are in need of heightened understanding and support from professionals in local school buildings where they spend a large portion of their day. To help educators more thoroughly understand their experience, the 5 stages of deployment are described below:

Stages of Deployment

Stage 1:

Pre-Deployment – Begins with the warning order to service member for deployment from home through their actual departure.

- ▶ Anticipation of loss vs. denial
- ▶ Train up and long hours away
- ▶ Getting affairs in order
- ▶ Mental/physical distance
- ▶ Tension builds

Stage 2:

Deployment – Period immediately following service member's departure from home through first month of deployment.

- ▶ Mixed emotions/relief
- ▶ Disoriented/overwhelmed
- ▶ Family numb, sad, alone
- ▶ Sleep difficulties
- ▶ Security and safety issues

Stage 5:

Post-Deployment – Begins with the arrival of the service member back home and typically lasts 3-6 months (or more) after return.

- ▶ Service member re-integrating into family
- ▶ Family "honeymoon" period
- ▶ Independence developed in sustainment stage redefined
- ▶ Need for "own" space
- ▶ Renegotiating routines

Stage 3:

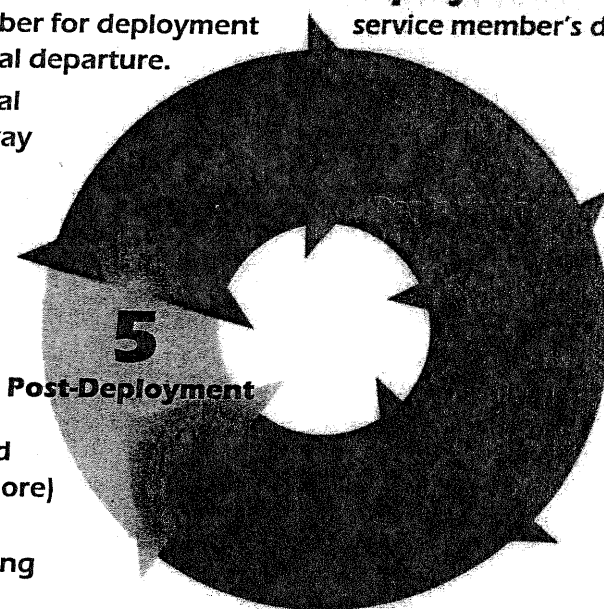
Sustainment – Lasts from first month through the end of deployment.

- ▶ New family routines established
- ▶ New sources of support developed
- ▶ Feel more in control of day to day life
- ▶ Sense of independence
- ▶ Family Confidence—"We can do this"

Stage 4

Re-Deployment – Defined as the month before the service member is scheduled to return home.

- ▶ Anticipation of homecoming
- ▶ Excitement
- ▶ Apprehension
- ▶ Burst of energy/"nesting"
- ▶ Difficulty making decisions



Symptoms of Deployment Related Stress in the Classroom

- ▶ Difficulty concentrating in school
- ▶ Unable to resume normal classroom assignments and activities
- ▶ Continued high levels of emotional response such as crying and intense sadness
- ▶ Appearing depressed, withdrawn and non-communicative
- ▶ Expressing sad or violent feelings in conversation, writings or drawings
- ▶ Intentionally hurting self or at risk for hurting others
- ▶ Gain or lose a significant amount of weight in a short period of time
- ▶ Discontinue taking care of personal appearance
- ▶ Exhibit possible drug or alcohol use/abuse

Teacher Intervention Strategies

Focus on students and the classroom learning environment – Retain routines and emphasis on the importance of learning while always leaving room to tend to student needs.

Provide structure – Maintain predictable schedule with clear behavioral guidelines and consequences. If student is distressed about circumstances of deployment, find appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs and fears.

Maintain objectivity – Respond in a calm and caring manner, answer questions in simple, direct terms. Regardless of political beliefs, refrain from expressing personal opinions.

Reinforce safety and security – After classroom discussions, end with a focus on student safety and the safety measures being taken on behalf of their loved one and others.

Be patient and reduce student workload as needed – Expect temporary slow downs or disruptions in learning when a deployment occurs.

Listen – Be approachable, attentive and sensitive to the unique needs of students coping with deployment and family separations. Take time to acknowledge the deployment and answer student questions in a factual manner.

Be sensitive to language and cultural needs – Be aware of, knowledgeable about, and sensitive to the language, values, and beliefs of other cultures. Inquire about school, community, and military resources available to assist.

Acknowledge and validate feelings – Help students develop a realistic understanding of deployment. Provide reassurance that the feelings of loss, anger, frustration and grief are normal and all individuals adjust at a different pace.

Strengths resulting from deployment

- ▶ Fosters maturity
- ▶ Emotional growth and insight
- ▶ Encourages independence, flexibility, and adapting to change
- ▶ Builds skills for adjusting to separations and losses faced later in life
- ▶ Strengthens family bonds
- ▶ Promotes awareness and understanding of importance of civic duty

<http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/> – <http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org>

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Information for this article adapted from *The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective* by LTC Simon H. Pincus, US, MC, COL; Robert House, USAR, MC, LTC; Joseph Christenson, USA, MC, and CAPT; Lawrence E. Alder, MC, USNR-R; and *Educators Guide to the Military Child During Deployment* by Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense and the National Traumatic Stress Network